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The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan

by

Kourken Ayvasian

Research Program on the U.S.S.R.

New York City

1955

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by

Kourken Ayvasian

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No. 74

THE THEATER IN SOVIET AZERBAIDZHAN

by

Kourken Ayvasian

Mr. Ayvasian graduated from the Baku State University and completed a postgraduate course of study there, specializing in literature, the history of the theater and the arts, and the Armenian and Azerbaidzhan languages. Subsequently he taught in a theater institute, served as consultant to three theaters (Armenian, Azerbaidzhan and Russian) in Baku, and lectured at the Baku State University. He is the author of Twenty Years of the Armenian Theater in Azerbaidzhan (Baku, 1938, izd. Azerneisher).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		page
I.	The Pre-Soviet Azerbaidzhan Theater.	1
	Early Azerbaidzhan Playwrights	1
	The Rise of a Tradition of Naturalism in Acting	4
	The Repertoire	5
II.	The Soviet Era	6
	The New Playwrights.	6
	Dzhafar Dzhabarly.	6
	Samed Vurgun	11
	Mirza Ibrahimov.	13
	Suleiman Rustam.	14
	The Defects of Soviet Azerbaidzhan Drama	16
	Acting Techniques.	18
III.	The Political Status and Living Conditions of Actors in Soviet Azerbaidzhan.	23
	The Fate of the Actor Sharifov	24
	A Note on Transliteration.	28
	A Note on Play Titles.	28

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I. The Pre-Soviet Azerbaidzhan Theater

Early Azerbaidzhan Playwrights

Although Azerbaidzhan has a rich literature in the novel and poetry, it has failed to produce many dramatists. Its dramatic heritage has been further diminished by the fact that only a few works by prerevolutionary playwrights have been retained on the Soviet stage in Azerbaidzhan.

The talented Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878) is one of the writers whose plays have survived into the Soviet era. Akhundov was a poet, philosopher and writer of comedies. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century he began thinking of the creation of a theater in Azerbaidzhan, and for this purpose wrote a number of comedies based on the life of his people. He chose the field of comedy because he believed that the vices of a people can be eradicated only through ridicule.[1]

The best known of Akhundov's plays are Hadji Gara (Gadzhi Gara in Russian transliteration) and The Alchemist.[2] Hadji Gara is the best example of the comedy of situation not only among the works of Akhundov but in the dramatic literature of Azerbaidzhan as a whole. Hadji Gara is a merchant planning to cross the Persian frontier with smuggled goods. The guide he chooses for this expedition turns out to be a bandit, the leader of the very gang that has been plotting to rob him during his trip.

Akhundov creates dramatic situations with masterly skill; his words are clear, intelligible and neatly pointed. Hadji Gara is still produced in Azerbaidzhan theaters, and a Soviet film scenario was based on it in the 1920's.

In 1873 Nadjafbeg Vezirov (1854-1926), then a student in the Baku technical secondary school, later to become a

---

1. In a letter to Mirza Muhammad Djafar, Akhundov wrote, "Nothing can eradicate and destroy man's vices and bad habits but criticism, irony and laughter." Quoted in Dzhafarov, Dzh., Azerbaidzhanskii Ordena Trudovovo Krasnovo Znameni Gosudarstvennyi Dramaticheskii Teatr imeni Meshadi Azizbekova [The Azerbaidzhan Red Banner State Dramatic Theater Named for Meshadi Azizbekov], Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," Moscow, 1951, p. 21; first published in Revolyutsiya i kul'tura [Revolution and Culture], No. 6-7, 1938, p. 105.

2. Akhundov wrote the following comedies: Molla Ibragim Khalil--alkhimik, obladatel' filosofskovo kamnya [Mulla Ibrahim

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prominent playwright, joined with some fellow-students to stage Akhundov's Vizier of Lenkoran. Shortly afterwards, Vezirov also staged Hadji Gara. These two performances of his comedies were the only ones Akhundov ever saw.

The amateur group which produced these two plays, later to be known as the Baku Nucleus (Bakinskoye yadro), founded the Azerbaidzhan theater. It became the model for the creation of similar troupes in other towns, notably Shusha, which after 1882 developed under the guidance of Yusif-bek Melik-Akhnazarov into the second theatrical center of Azerbaidzhan. In the eighties, led by another student, Gabibbeg Mahmudbeg, the Baku Nucleus became a professional theatrical company.

During this period the repertoire of the Azerbaidzhan theater began to grow with the addition of works by new playwrights: Nadjafbeg Vezirov, Abdurahim-bek Akhverdov, N. Narimanov, and Gashim-bek Vezirov, among others. The chief contribution of these writers is that they carried on the tradition initiated by Akhundov, establishing contemporary subjects, drawn from the life of their people, as the basis for Azerbaidzhan national drama.

N. Vezirov, writing after 1873, became known chiefly for his plays Nothing Left But the Name, Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire, Fakhreddin's Misfortune, and Hero of the Time.[1] In these plays Vezirov develops the thesis that what-

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Khalil, the Alchemist and Possessor of the Philosophers' Stone], usually known simply as The Alchemist (1850); Mus'ye Zhordan, botanik i dervish Mastali-shakh, znamenityi koldun [Monsieur Jordan, Botanist, and the Dervish Mastali-shah, Famous Magician], usually known as Monsieur Jordan (1850); Vizir lenkoranskovo khanstva [The Vizier of Lenkoran] (1850); Medved'--pobeditel' razboinik [The Bear, Victor Over the Bandit] (1851); Izvestnyi "Gadzhi Gara" ili "Priklyuchennive skryagi" [The Famous Hadji Gara, or The Adventures of a Miser] (1852); and Advokaty Tavriza [Lawyers of Tabriz] (1855). It should be noted that the Russian translations of the titles of Azerbaidzhan plays, including those of Akhundov, are by no means consistent. For example the last-named work will also be encountered under the title Pravozastupniki v gorode Tavrize [Defenders of the Law in Tabriz]. There is an article on Akhundov in the 2nd edition of the Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya [Large Soviet Encyclopediya], Vol. III, Moscow, 1950, pp. 571-572.

1. Sushchestvuyet lish' odno nazvanive; Iz ognya, da v polymya; Gore Fakhreddina; and Geroi vremeni. Variant translations into Russian are frequent.

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ever is evil in man's nature or has been distorted by life can be corrected only by ethical and cultural education. Almost all his protagonists wage a losing battle against antiquated principles. Fakhreddin's Misfortune is a typical example of this pattern. The hero of the play, Fakhreddin, attempts to introduce new scientific methods to improve the operation of his farm and thus relieve his people of the ignorance that has burdened them for ages. But Fakhreddin, who represents the young new intelligentsia, has only a superficial understanding of existing social contitions. He underestimates the strength of old traditions, and this error in judgment is the cause of his downfall.

Another writer who played a prominent part in the development of the Azerbaidzhan theater in the nineties was A. Akhverdov. In 1899 he returned to Baku from St. Petersburg, where he had been studying, joined the troupe headed by Mahmudbeg (originally the Baku Nucleus), and became its director. Having been closely connected with Russian theatrical companies in St. Petersburg, particularly the Aleksandrinski Theater, he was in a position to introduce into Azerbaidzhan the cultural traditions and latest achievements of the Russian theater. He began his playwrighting career in 1896, while still in St. Petersburg, with The Devastated Homestead (Razoryonnoye gnezdo). Subsequently he wrote a number of other plays, among them The Sorceress Peri (Volshebnitsa Peri) and The Unfortunate Young Man (Neschastnyi yunosha). In the latter, he sets the old feudal customs in opposition to new, progressive ideas, touching upon the problem of land reform.[1] Under his directorship of the Mahmudbeg company, the repertoire was expanded to include G. Vezirov's Marriage Is Not Like a Drink of Water (Zhenit'sya ne vody napit'sya) and translations of Shakespeare's Othello and Gogol's The Inspector General.

1. Akhverdov was later elected a member of the Second Duma and returned to St. Petersburg, where he expounded his views on the urgent need for land reform in Azerbaidzhan.

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The Rise of a Tradition of Naturalism in Acting

During these years, the company boasted a number of good actors, including Djihangir Zaynalov, Gusein (Husein) Arablinski, G. K. Sarabski (Rzayev), A. Rzayev, Agalar Geraibeili, M.M. Kyazumovski, Minza-Aga Aliyev, and Sidgi Rukhulla.[1] Aliyev and Rukhulla are still alive and working in the theaters of Soviet Azerbaidzhan. Two famous artists of the Azerbaidzhan theater who later became victims of the Stalin regime, Abas Mirza Sharifov and Ul'vi Redjab, were also acting at this time.

Outstanding among the older actors was Zaynalov, who as early as the eighties had achieved prominence in the field of comedy for the naturalism of his acting. Zaynalov believed that theater is a school and the actor an instructor. He subscribed to the dictum of Shchepkin, who said, "that the theater not entertainment, but a serious business." Zaynalov held that an actor must work painstakingly and penetratingly if his art is to have merit. Creating some immortal characterizations, such as the title roles in Hadji Gara and The Vizier of Lenkoran as well as Mulla Ibrahim Khalil in The Alchemist and Mastali Shah in Monsieur Jordan, he raised and perfected the art of comic acting in Azerbaidzhan and established a tradition which is still followed in its theaters.

Zaynalov's part in the development of Azerbaidzhan comedy was paralleled by Arablinski's contribution to the art of tragic acting. Arablinski was fourteen or fifteen years old when, despite the protests of his family, he left the Russian-Azerbaidzhan school for the theater. He began to play serious parts in 1905, his first such role being that of the young hero in Fakhreddin's Misfortune. Like Zaynalov, he believed that the basis of an actor's work should be absolute naturalness, that an actor must be essentially true to life. "Do not be an actor on stage," he said; "Be an ordinary person, speak as an ordinary person does, and the effect will be created without your being aware of it." His goal was to convince the audience of the reality of the emotions and experiences presented on the stage.

Perhaps his greatest acting triumph, the role which confirmed his status as a true tragedian, was that of Othello.

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1. See the article "Azerbaidzhanskaya sovestkaya sotsialisticheska respublika. Teatr i kino" [Azerbaidzhan S.S.R. Theater and Film], Large Soviet Encyclopedia, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1949, Vol. I, p. 479.

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Othello had been translated by G. Vezirov in 1892, but its first performance on the Azerbaidzhan stage took place in 1904, with the translator playing the title role. In 1907 Arablinski, who always kept in touch with the Russian theater through his friendship with the actors Dal'ski, Petrov-Drayevski, Orlyon'yev and others, saw a performance of Othello on the Russian stage. He was so inspired and moved that he spent three years in deep and meticulous study of the play. Finally, in 1910, he was given the opportunity to play Othello on the Azerbaidzhan stage. Most tragic actors in interpreting Othello stressed his Moorish wildness, but Arablinski portrayed a man, a complete and real human being, a strong and passionate nature. For this, as well as his many other sensitive and realistic portrayals, Arablinski deservedly occupies a significant place in the history of the Azerbaidzhan theater.

The Repertoire

There are also musical comedies to be found in the early dramatic and musical art of Azerbaidzhan. For example, Arshin Mal alan and Mashadi Ibat by the talented composer Uzeiri Abdul Husein ogly Hadjibekov (1885-1948)[1] still hold the stage today. Many of the pre-Soviet Azerbaidzhan dramatic works were banned from the Soviet stage by the Bolshevik government. Arshin Mal alan, however, is so charming, colorful and musically rich that it is still loved by the public. Before the Revolution it had been translated into almost all the languages of Central Asia and Transcaucasia. After favorable appraisal by Stalin, it was translated into Russian and a Soviet movie was made of it.

Other musical dramas that were kept in the repertoire for a short time after the sovietization of Azerbaidzhan were Ashug Garib, Asli and Kerem, and Leili and Medzhnun. They were soon removed, however, on charges of representing "bourgeois sentimentality," alien to the spirit of Soviet ideology.

Naturally, this small repertoire proved insufficient to satisfy the audience and had to be enlarged with dramatic works of other nationalities. In general, the Azerbaidzhan theater was compelled to supplement its own dramatic literature with generous borrowings from other nations. Until 1928/29, for example, the following European classics formed part of the regular repertoire:

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1. Gadzhibekov in Russian transliteration.

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Shakespeare's Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, and Macbeth; Schiller's Don Carlos, The Robbers, and Intrigue and Love; Victor Hugo's Hernani; and Gutzkow's Uriel Acosta. Among the Russian classics played in translation were Ostrovski's The Forest, The Thunderstorm, and Guilty without Guilt. A considerate portion of the repertoire consisted of the works of Armenian playwrights, such as For Honor's Sake by A. Shirvanzade (1858-1935);Pepo and Khatabala by G. Sundukyan (1825-1912); and The Oriental Dentist and The Disadvantages of Politeness by A. Paronyani (1841-1891).

II. The Soviet Era

The New Playwrights

For seven or eight years after the sovietization of Azerbaidzhan, not a single dramatic work of any value was written. Conditions were so chaotic, so unclear politically, that playwrights could not conform to the demands of dramatic art. Their environment limited their scope and stunted the development of their individual talent and creative instinct. To show and condemn the evils of the period and point the way to improvement was not permitted; everything had to be presented in a rosy light. On the other hand, "reform" movements in the theater, such as the so-called Satir-Agit Theater, simply confused the dramatist.[1] (The principle of this type of theater was that "the actor must create not in the theater but spontaneously, among the workers in industry during their midday break.")

This frustrating situation prevailed until the mid-twenties, when the playwright Dzhafar Dzhabarly (1899-1934) made his appearance. Dzhabarly unquestionably had talent, a fact which was particularly evident in his historical plays where he skillfully distorted historical facts in the interests of Communist propaganda. He began his literary activities before the Revolution; in 1923 he wrote Oktai, Son of the People, and Aydun. His real growth as a dramaturgist, however, dates from 1927.

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1. According to Dzhafarov, op. cit., p. 106, the Satir-Agit Theatre was established in Baku in November 1921 on the basis of the Chauve-Souris (Letuchaya Mysh') troupe from Moscow, which disbanded there after giving its last performances on tour. Later the theater was renamed the Baku Workers' Theater. In 1932 it moved to Kirovabad. Ibid, p. 107.

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Dzhabarly was the first of the writers of the Azerbaidzhan literary world of this period to follow the ideas of Communism and put his talent fully at its disposal. Many of his contemporaries would not accede to the Soviet regime, and some paid with their lives, among them Husein Djavid, the lyric poet and dramatist,[1] and the writers Manafli and Trinich.

It cannot be said that Dzhabarly took to the Bolshevik ideology easily. For a long time after his acceptance of Communism, he could not free himself of his "nationalist" ideas. It was only after a six-months prison term, on a charge of nationalism, that he produced his most pro-Soviet play, Yashar (premiere 1932). Only three of his many plays depict Soviet life: Sevil', Yashar, and Almas. The Bride of Fire and 1905 are historical plays; Oktai, Son of the People and Aydun are based on the everyday life of the people before the Revolution. All of Dzhabarly's plays, however, attempt to demonstrate the Marxian thesis that the history of mankind is the history of class struggle.

In Aydun, the hero is a young blacksmith working in the factory of a wealthy industrialist. His wife, Gyul'takin, celebrated among the women of her town for her beauty, is loved by the industrialist. Tempted by his wealth, she divorces her husband and marries the older man. Aydun rebels against his employer but, realizing his helplessness, tries to drown his sorrow in wine.

Dzhabarly evinces a deep nationalism in his treatment of the family mores of Azerbaidzhan. He censures his heroine for the breaking of the national tradition that the wife is completely subservient to the husband and has no right to emancipation. Bolshevism, which was loudly proclaiming the emancipation of women and their right to free love, passed over this aspect of the plot in silence. The clash between the hero and his rival was presented much more forcefully and had more meaning for Bolshevism because it exemplified class warfare. In real life, moreover, so far as Azerbaidzhan was concerned the problem of women's new position in society existed only in words.

In 1928 Dzhabarly wrote his historical play The Bride of Fire, which describes the ninth-century movement against Arab domination led by the famous Azerbaidzhan intellectual and revolutionary Babek.[2] The play distorts historical fact

1. Among Djavid's works are Iblis (The Devil), The Precipice (Propast') and Afet. For a criticism of Djavid from the Communist point of view, see Dzhafarov, op. cit., pp.109-110.
1. For a discussion of the play see Dzhafarov, op. cit, pp. 137-142.

2. For a discussion of the play see Dzhafarov, op. cit., pp. 137-142.

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to present the movement in an anti-religious light. In the play the people, led by El'khan, the character who represents Babek, struggle to free themselves from their Arab overlords and the religion these conquerors have imposed, Islam. Elkhan fights against his brother Akshin, who has adopted the Arab faith, and against his feudal lord, Altunbey, who has yielded to the Arabs.

El'khan is in love with Solmaz who, as the most beautiful maiden in the land, has been chosen by the people to personify the god of good, Ormuzd. According to the ancient faith of the land (a form of fire worship) and the laws of the temple of the fire-worshippers, Solmaz is then permitted to marry only the wealthiest and most distinguished lord of the land. Thus she is destined for Altunbey. However, she can marry neither El'khan nor Altunbey, for the Arabs demand that she be either sent to the harem of the Caliph of Bagdad or committed to the flames. The title of the play, Bride of Fire, originates from this ultimatum. The priests, fearful lest they lose the privileges accorded them by the Arabs, agree to burn her. At the last moment, El'khan, who has roused the people against their oppressors, succeeds in stopping the sacrifice, but Solmaz is captured by the Arabs.

The play ends with a meeting between El'khan and his brother Akshin, leader of the Arab troops. Akshin offers him the pardon of the Caliph of Bagdad and the hand of Solmaz if he will recounce his beliefs and accept Islam; El'khan is forced to choose between Solmaz with a Koran in her hand or the gallows. Solmaz and El'khan prefer death to the renunciation of their faith. In a last monologue directed to his people, El'khan forcefully denies the existence of Allah.

While Dzhabarly presents the movement led by Babek as anti-religious, actually it was a revolutionary effort to liberate the people from the domination of the Arabs. It is noteworthy that the play was written during the period of furious atheistic propaganda, when churches and temples were being destroyed throughout the Soviet Union and church functionaries persecuted. In Baku almost all the churches and mosques were razed; one synagogue was converted into a theater for Jewish drama and Azerbaidzhan musical comedy. It was at the express wish of the Communist Party that Dzhabarly recast the anti-religious atmosphere of Soviet Azerbaidzhan into historical guise.

Dzhabarly's historical plays were very short-lived as compared with those in which his subject matter is taken from the Soviet period. Sevil', first produced in October 29, 1928, is typical of this group.[1]

1. For a discussion see ibid., pp. 142-146.

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Its theme is the regeneration of an Azerbaidzhan woman. The play begins with the appointment of the Communist Balash as director of the Azerbaidzhan State Bank. Balash considers himself a well-educated and cultured person, though actually he is a "promoted worker," an upstart of peasant origin. His wife, Sevil', is a simple peasant girl of no education. Balash suddenly finds that in his new prominence his wife is a drawback and a disgrace. He divorces Sevil' and marries another woman, who has captured him by her knowledge of the world. (She had taken a course in manicuring in Paris!) He leaves his two-year old child in the care of his sister who lives in the same house with him.

Sevil' is left penniless and leads a life of poverty and deprivation, working as a servant in various households. One day she happens to meet a wedding procession and receives her portion of sweets, which in the old Oriental tradition are handed out to the people at weddings and festivals. Wishing to take these sweets to her little son, Sevil' goes to Balash's house.

The touching scene of her meeting with the child is interrupted by the entrance of Balash and his second wife, who is indignant to find her there. She orders her husband to "throw out" this woman. Sevil' stops Balash. Throwing off her chadra (the veil worn by Caucasian women), she tells him how she has been waiting for him, hoping he would realize what he has done. But now she sees her patience has been useless, she understands much that was not clear to her before, and at last she feels she can find a new life for herself.

Sevil' goes to Moscow to study and become a leader in civic affairs; she even writes a book, The Turkish Woman's Way to Freedom. When Sevil' returns to her native town, she is well known and widely respected. Balash, seeing that she now outclasses his second wife, begs her for forgiveness and asks her to return to him. The play ends with Sevil's refusal, taking her child away from him.

The picture Dzhabarly paints of the life of an Azerbaidzhan woman is real only up to the moment when Balash divorces his wife and remarries. All the rest is fiction, deliberate falsification of reality. If the destiny of one woman in a million was similar to that of Sevil', it was not because of the benevolence of the Bolsheviks but because of their policy of elevating one person from the masses for propaganda purposes.

But the work in which Dzhabarly most successfully

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meets the demands of the Party is his play on kolkhoz life, Yashar.[1] It is of particular interest in that it reveals the methods used by the NKVD to corral peasants into collective farms. The Central Committee of the Azerbaidzhan Communist Party had decreed the organization of a collective farm in a district where the land consists of salt marshes unsuitable for cultivation. As part of the program for reclaiming the land, an electric power plant is to be built in this location. The undertaking is entrusted to a young engineer, Yashar, who, further to strengthen the propaganda content of the play, is depicted as a peasant whom the Party has adopted and educated. He now returns to his native village to carry out the honored task of organizing a collective farm.

His return excites the surprise and admiration of the people; they are amazed at his miraculous transformation. There are exclamations of, "Look at him--see what he has become. He even drives around in a motor car! And what clothes! Look at those shoes...." Impressed by his appearance, and thinking that as one of them he cannot wish them harm, the peasants tend to follow his advice about joining the kolkhoz. When Yagut, the girl he loves, asks him, "But how is it you became an engineer so fast?", he explains that the credit belongs to the Communist Party and the great Stalin. Thus Yashar becomes living Communist propaganda in his village. Torgul, another engineer and an NKVD official, who arrives in the village at the same time as Yashar, frequently cites him as an example, telling the villagers: "Work, do your very best. Build the kolkhoz! You see how the Party helps you. Look at your fellow peasant, Yashar. He was a plain, ignorant lad, and now he is chief engineer. He came here for you, to help you build your new life."

To exemplify the class enemy working against the collective farm, two men are assigned to steal the construction plans for the electric power plant. They fail because Yagut discovers their designs, hides the plans, and "informs" against them; they are later exposed as enemies of the people and arrested.

Another obstacle to the formation of the kolkhoz is the fact that the ignorant, illiterate peasants cannot understand or imagine how these vast lands saturated with salt can be made fit for cultivation. Yashar holds a meeting to explain this to them, but his speech, profusely interspersed with chemical formulas, is beyond their comprehension. Stunned and gaping, they stand looking at him, obviously convinced the Communist Party has transformed him into a superman.

1. For a discussion of the play see ibid., pp.166-168.

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One of the peasants, Hasan-ali, asks, "But I still don't understand, what is this H_2O?" Torgul promises to explain and calls him aside after the meeting. However, when Hasan-ali sees the impressive insignia of the NKVD on Torgul military shirt, he is so abashed that he begins without waiting for the explanation, "Yes, yes, I understood, you see, what 'H' means." (In the Azerbaidzhan language the word ash ("H") means pilav, a rice porridge.) "Ash is pilav--but the 'O'. You'll have to excuse an old man, I don't know what that is." Torgul, laughing, explains that the "O" is a gas. (Another play on words; gas ("gas") in Azerbaidzhan means "goose.") So the simple Hasan-ali joyously exclaims that now he understands everything! H_2O means a good pilav with raisins, topped off with a roast goose. But if that is what a kolkhoz is about - why all the talk? Of course everyone will join the kolkhoz. Torgul tells Yashar about the incident, and both laugh at the simplicity of Hasan-ali.

This scene is written with humor, but it is a realistic representation of the kolkhoz campaign, which was full of such misunderstandings: ignorant peasants joined collective farms without grasping their true significance. Moreover, peasants were forced to enter collective farms whether they understood them or not, because individual farmers could not survive under the system of exorbitant taxation, restriction of sales, and other repressions which the government instituted.

By decree of the Party, this play was translated into Russian and Armenian and was produced on all the kolkhoz stages of Transcaucasia during the period of collectivization. Once the collectivization drive was over and the play's usefulness was at an end, Yashar disappeared from the repertoire.

The poet Samed Vurgun (born in 1906) is another outstanding playwright of the Soviet period.[1] His literary activities, which began after the sovietization of Azerbaidzhan, have been singled out by the government for rewards and decorations. He has written three plays, Vagif, Khanlar and Fakhrad and Shirin. We shall consider briefly the first of these.

In Vagif, Vurgun describes the life of the famous poet of that name who lived in the eighteenth century (1717-1797).[2]

1. Real name Samed Vurgun Yusif ogly Velikov. For a biography see Large Soviet Encyclopedia, 2nd ed., Vol. IX, Moscow, 1951, pp. 406-407.

2. For a discussion of the play and its performance see Dzhabarly, op. cit., pp. 185-191.

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The play shows Vagif living in the Khan's palace as Grand Vizier of Shusha. He invites the khan to the wedding of his only son and also invites a shepherd. The Khan is so enraged to see a penniless rustic at the same table with himself that he leaves the vizier's house, threatening to avenge the dishonor Vagif has brought upon him. The pride of the shepherd, El'dar, is also wounded. Concealing his resentment, El'dar leaves for the mountains, where he organizes bands of rebels against the Khan.

The Khan deprives Vagif of his office and arrests him, accusing him of complicity in the revolt led by El'dar. Just at that moment Shah Kadzhar (Kajar) of Persia invades Karabakh and the Khanate of Shusha. He conquers the Khanate, kills the Khan, and puts Vagif and his son in prison. El'dar leads his rebel bands down from the mountains and attacks and defeats Shah Kadzhar, driving the enemy troops out of Shusha. Arriving just as Vagif is about to be put to death, he saves the poet. Then El'dar, hero and liberator, pronounces a propaganda speech advocating an almost socialist society, a society with neither slaves nor khans but with equality for all. On this note the play ends.

If we examine the historical basis of this play, we can see how Vurgun treats the facts. It is historically true that Vagif existed, that he was the Grand Vizier of Shusha, and that he was a great poet. It is also true that the invasion of Shusha by Shah Kadzhar occurred at this time, and that the Khan was killed by the Shah.

But the fate of Vagif and his son at the hands of the Shah was quite different from that described in the play. Moreover, Vagif's son was nine years old at the time, not a young man getting married. According to historical data, the Shah commanded Vagif and his son to be taken to the outskirts of the town of Shusha, where there was a steep precipice. The boy was thrown over the cliff first; when the executioners came for the father, they found him dead. Vagif had not been able to survive the awful sight of the murder of his only son.

These aspects of the play, as well as the revolt organized by El'dar, are all fruits of Vurgun's imagination. Class warfare had to be invented where none existed, for

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Vurgun's aim was to prove that "the history of mankind is the history of class struggle." Since Vurgun did not hesitate to remold history in the interests of the Party it is scarcely surprising that this play won a Stalin Prize of the second category.

Another Azerbaidzhan playwright, Mirza Adzhan-ogly Ibrahimov (born 1911), is one of those Communists who reached a position of eminence by climbing over the bodies of others. He became head of the Committee on Art Affairs of Azerbaidzhan and even achieved the distinction of being named a delegate to the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.[1] Only one of his plays, Hayat need be discussed here.[2]

In the Azerbaidzhan language the word "hayat" means "life"; in the play the word is used as the name of a heroine. Hayat carries herself with serene assurance; her thinking and manner of expression are authoritative, terse, incisive. She is dressed in a military uniform and high brown boots. She never looks directly at the person to whom she is speaking, and if she should glance at him, does so with her head lowered as if seeing with the whites of her eyes. Anyone at whom she does look cannot help being awestruck. Even if she did not remove her muffler and reveal her insignia on the collar of her blouse, anyone living in a Soviet country would realize that this woman is no simple community leader like Sevil' in Dzhabarly's play, but an officer of the Azerbaidzhan NKVD. In this respect Ibrahimov has outdone Dzhabarly. He has said that he wanted Hayat to embody the thesis attributed to Lenin that every cook must take part in the government.

Hayat depicts collective farm life during the period 1936-37. Mashadi Husein, a former kulak, is now chairman of the kolkhoz and under his management it is not prospering. Little by little, the class enemy wrecks the kolkhoz. (Incidentally, no evidence of Husein's sabotage is presented; we are given only his competitor's word for it.) The latter is

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1. For a short biography, see the Large Soviet Encyclopedia, Vol. XVII, Moscow, 1952, p. 260.

2. For a discussion of the play and its production see Dzhafarov, op. cit., pp. 180-184. The Russian transliteration of the title is Khayat.

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the Communist Abas, once a hired farm hand. He accuses Husein of wrecking the kolkhoz because of his kulak origin. It is decided to dismiss Husein, and Abas is elected to replace him.

In addition to Husein, Ibrahimov presents another type of "wrecker" of socialized agriculture: Suleiman, a former member of the Moslem Democratic Party (Mussavat). These two men league together in their hostile activity.

Meanwhile, Abas, the new chairman, falls in love with Atlas, one of the girls on the collective farm. She is also loved by Haydar, an ignorant farm youth. Suleiman and Husein persuade Haydar to murder his rival, and as soon as he slays Abas, Suleiman and Husein in turn kill him. They hope in this way to create the impression that the two rivals quarreled and killed each other. It appears as if they have successfully hidden their role in the murder, and the real reason behind it, when, suddenly, Hayat arrives in the village. All she has to do is give one magical, terrifying look, and Husein falls on his knees before her and confesses all. Suleiman is then apprehended at the Persian frontier, to which he had fled in terror.

As a reward for Hayat, Ibrahimov received the Order of Lenin. The play was considered a realistic picture of an Azerbaidzhan woman and by decree of the Central Committee was included in the repertoire of all the theaters of Transcaucasia. Actually, Hayat is so absurd, so completely inartistic and uninteresting, that only its first performance was well attended. At each subsequent performance, the size of the audience dwindled perceptibly.

Finally, we must pause to consider the work of one more Azerbaidzhan playwright, Suleiman Rustam, author of the play Nabi, the Brigand.[1] This play, written in 1940, is particularly insolent in its distortion of history. Nabi is presented as a popular hero, a revolutionary and a benefactor of the oppressed, beloved by his people. Pursued by the Tsar's gendarmerie, he escapes to the mountains and organizes a revolt against the tsarist government. From the mountains he makes raids on roads and farmhouses, robbing rich traveling merchants and wealthy landowners and giving their possessions away to the poor. Nabi's wife, Khadzhar, his right hand, plays a prominent role in his "revolutionary" work.

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1. For a discussion see Dzhabarly, op. cit., pp. 197-199.

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The tsarist government conducts a long, unsuccessful struggle against Nabi, sending out large armed forces to capture him. At last, tsarist officials manage to bribe one of Nabi's followers, who kills him.

Let us examine the historical facts. Nabi was active at the end of the nineteenth century, chiefly in Zangezur, the birthplace of the author of the present article. The real Nabi was not a revolutionary hero but simply a bandit and an extreme nationalist. After he had committed many robberies the authorities made serious efforts to capture him. Hiding from his pursuers in the woods, Nabi organized bands of brigands who raided the countryside purely for their own profit. None of them had any philanthropic intentions: they did not share their booty with the poor or offer them any assistance. Because of the old enmity between the Tatars and the Armenians, Nabi robbed only Armenians, generally wealthy merchants, though sometimes his victims were Armenians of no wealth at all.

Finally the tsarist forces succeeded in arresting him and put him in prison in the town of Goris (Gerusi) in Armenia. Nabi did not remain in prison long. He managed to break the bars of his windows and escaped across the Persian frontier. In Persia he continued his career of brigandage until he was killed by the Persians while attempting to steal some valuable rugs.

The distortion of fact in Vagif, The Bride of Fire, and other historical plays was scarcely noted by the general public, which was not well acquainted with the historical occurrences treated in these plays. But the perversion of historical events in Nabi, the Brigand could not pass unnoticed. These events had occurred fairly recently and the true story was not only familiar to all, but many actual witnesses were still alive. The reaction of the people to this play was therefore one of surprise and concealed indignation.

* * * * *

The plays we have discussed above constitute a survey of some of the most important dramatic works of the Azerbaidzhan theater during the Soviet period. During the approximately thirty years of Soviet rule in Azerbaidzhan not a single drama of outstanding merit has been written.

At the same time, theater facilities have expanded

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in Azerbaidzhan so that there is now a legitimate theater not only in Baku[1] but in the regional centers as well. There is a musical comedy theater, theater for young audiences, and even touring collective farm theaters. However, these theaters are no longer devoted to serving the arts, but, as we have seen, have become merely political rostrums, skillfully used by the Communists to implement their current policies and to indoctrinate the masses.

The Defects of Soviet Azerbaidzhan Drama

The defects of Soviet Azerbaidzhan drama result from its violation of certain basic principles of theater art. A drama is a well-considered work, the production of which requires the cooperation of the director, the actor, and all the personnel of the theater. In order to produce a first-rate work of art, therefore, the playwright must have a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities and principles of the theater. Let us analyze the drama of Soviet Azerbaidzhan to ascertain to what extent it conforms to these principles.

Visual presentation is of first importance in any theatrical performance, but this principle is all too frequently violated in the drama of Soviet Azerbaidzhan. The play Yashar by Dzhabarly is typical in this respect. The second and third acts of the play consist solely of public meetings. Yashar and Torgul make long, boring speeches, the chairman of the collective farm gives his yearly report, "brigade leaders" and other members join in the discussion, and every meeting ends with a peroration delivered by the NKVD official, the long-winded Togrul. No attempt is made to use the mass scenes to theatrical effect, hence the emptiness of the theaters after the play's first performance. It is characteristic of almost all Soviet drama that the stage is made a speaker's stand, the actors agitators and the auditorium a lecture hall.

1. In Baku there are now the following theaters: the Azerbaidzhan State Dramatic Theater Named for Azizbekov; the Azerbaidzhan State Theater of Opera and Ballet Named for Mirza Fatali Akhundov; the Theater of Russian Drama; and the Theater of the Young Spectator Named for Maxim Gorki. There is also an Azerbaidzhan State Theatrical Institute Named for Mirza Fatali Akhundov which supplies actors for the network of regional theaters throughout the country. Large Soviet Encyclopedia, 2nd ed., Vol. I, p. 480.

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Just as it tends toward prolixity, so the dramatic art of Soviet Azerbaidzhan lacks the power of verbal expression, a second basic ingredient of good theater. The words of these playwrights lack eloquence and emotional depth; they fail to convey the inner life of the characters depicted, their spiritual experiences, their mental and emotional reactions. This is the result, in part, of stereotyped characterizations arising out of the exigencies of party propaganda. So consistently do the protagonists fail to express normal human feelings that if there is a romantic plot in the play, it is not disclosed in the speech or actions of the lovers; the audience learns about it from the gossip of other characters. In Yashar, the hero loves Yagut and in Hayat, Abas loves Atlas, but in neither of these plays do the lovers give any intimation, by word or gesture, of their emotions. Yet in Hayat, Atlas voices her profound disturbance over the destruction of a large quantity of fertilizer in the collective farm; the murder of Abas, however, whom she supposedly loves, creates no stir, evokes no expression of her suffering. The inevitable conclusion is that the Bolsheviks consider it unworthy for the new Soviet woman to feel greater despair over a dead lover than over the loss of some fertilizer.

This absence of human emotions springs from another basic flaw in Soviet Azerbaidzhan drama: the disregard of the demands of the audience of the Party. Theater seats, after all, are occupied by individuals, each with his own viewpoint, psychology and beliefs. Since it is obviously impossible to please everybody, the playwright must concentrate on the average spectator. The emotional and mental experiences portrayed, the ideas expressed by a play, must be understandable and interesting to the usual playgoer. The spectator comes to the theater for emotional relaxation and cultural stimulation, not to listen to Yashar's dry chemical formulas or Torgul's tirades on Soviet ethics. Such examples clearly demonstrate that the requirements of the Party and the government take precedence over consideration of the audience's desires and the demands of dramatic art.

A very noticeable defect of Soviet Azerbaidzhan drama is its lack of structural unity. Instead of developing and resolving a single problem, each play deals with several subjects simultaneously. This can be done successfully only if the secondary questions are closely linked to the main theme of the play; otherwise, coherence is lost and the audience is left with a chaotic impression. In Dzhabarly's play 1905,[1] for example, all these themes are developed at the

1. Russian title V 1905 godu. For a discussion, see Dzhabarly, op. cit., pp. 163-166.

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same time: the policy of the tsarist forces in Transcaucasia; the love of the Azerbaidzhan youth, Bakhshi, for the Armenian girl, Sona, which also involves the problem of the difference in their religions; and the competition between two Baku oil magnates, the Azerbaidzhan Salamov and the Armenian Agamyan. Yashar concerns itself with two subjects: the organization of the collective farm, and the construction of the electric power plant. The romance between Yashar and Yagut is introduced as a minor element. Given the multiplicity of themes, Yagut's motivation is never clarified: is it for love of Yashar that she hides the plans and exposed the sabotage, or out of loyalty to the socialist order? Plays like these leave the audience with only the most confused notion of what is going on.

Another, and perhaps the most important shortcoming of Soviet Azerbaidzhan drama lies in its lack of effective theatrical dynamics. The plays of this period contain either no action at all or else nothing but action. Yashar and Hayat consist of speeches; whatever motions accompany the words are not dramatic. Vagif and 1905, on the contrary, are almost entirely action: the stage is seething with movement, with the continuous running about and uproar of battle scenes. What is missing in all these plays is dramatic action, the dynamic development of the inner life of the characters portrayed.

Thus none of the plays of this period fulfills the requirements of theater art; they represent simply propaganda assignments handed down by the Communist Party. In other words, these plays should be considered as the policy of the Communist Party expressed through the medium of the theater, the actors and the playwrights, and not as works of art.

Acting Technique

It is the richness of the actor's technique, his expression, the faithfulness of his artistic portrayal, and his ability to communicate emotional experiences and passions that give the audience an understanding of the purpose and substance of the play. Let us therefore see how the actors of Soviet Azerbaidzhan have performed their essential function in theater art, and where their weaknesses lie.

Many of the flaws in the acting of this period result from the shortcomings of the plays themselves, of course. Roles consisting primarily of public speeches (lectures on

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collectivization, addresses at meetings and so on) are not essentially dramatic and call for talents different from those demanded by complex character interpretation. In delivering a stock Soviet speech, an actor is given as much opportunity for action as an orator standing on a rostrum before the public. The actor is then no longer an artistic creator, personifying ideas: he is merely a mouthpiece for Party propaganda.

If one adds to this handicap the stage techniques imposed on the director by some Party organizer or committee, one can only pity both actor and director. In these oratorical scenes the director is asked to place the actor making the speech at the front of the stage, facing the audience; the rest of the cast, whom he is supposedly addressing, is behind him, at the back of the stage. Sometimes the speech-maker is even placed in front of the stage, to bring him yet closer to the audience.

In delivering the speech, the actor uses all the tricks of rhetoric, even shouting out didactic slogans. Resort to oratory determines not only the manner of speech and intonation but also the actor's entire performance: the pose he assumes, his gestures, facial expression, and even make-up. As a result there is a sameness about different characters in different plays; their movements on the stage are mechanical, sometimes entirely unmotivated;their make-up is applied with harsh, sharp strokes.

Another reason for the deterioration of craftsmanship in the acting profession is that plots and characters in Soviet drama are stereotypes. The audience easily classifies the cast into class enemy, Party worker, and so on, and knows from the first act how the theme will be developed and how the problems will be resolved. Ibrahimov's Hayat is typical in that the conversation and attitudes of the actors immediately identify them, so that the audience can predict the course of the play after a few minutes of action.

For example, if the actor is cast as a Party worker, he feels obligated to assume a pompous posture, with one arm resting across his chest, hand thrust into his coat, in imitation of Stalin. Such persons are immune to emotional disturbances and human suffering; they are bloodless. Given a role like this, the actor does not examine, does not want to examine, the fundamental nature of the character he is creating. He becomes interested only in the trite phrases which provoke cheap applause and in the externalities which label the stage figure.

All characterizations of kolkhoz chairmen followed the same hackneyed pattern. One actor, R. Afganly, was assigned

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the part of kolkhoz chairman in almost all the Soviet plays given in the Azizbekov Theater in Baku.[1] He portrayed them all in exactly the same way, making no changes in either their appearance or nature. All these parts were a repetition of the "promoted worker," an illiterate farm hand pushed by the Party into a prominent position. All of them were demanding, pitiless and heartless; all their reports and speeches began and ended with "Long live the Great Stalin," at which point applause was obligatory. Yet Afganly was not untalented; his interpretations of classical roles were superb in technique and insight.

NKVD officials were cut from the same cloth. In the plays Hayat and Yashar, the only difference between Hayat and Torgul is that one is a woman and the other a man. Both are exclusively concerned with the organization and administration of collective farms; both are stern, excessively stubborn, insistent, bad-tempered, and unfeeling.

Heroines--Sevil', Almas[2] or Yagut-- were subject to the same conventional treatment. Almas and Yagut, for example, grew up in the same kind of environment and were educated by their families in the old Azerbaidzhan traditions. Under the Soviet government, both were re-educated and turned traitor to the old customs in order to win the notice and approval of the Party. Many such types could be met in Azerbaidzhan; almost all Communist youth (members of the Komsomol) were re-educated in this fashion.

People's Artist Mariza-khanum Davudova treated the parts of Almas and Yagut exactly alike, both in her expression of emotion and in her gestures.[3] Yet she is a distinguished actress, with great talent and sensitive artistic taste. Nor can she be reproached for monotony of interpretation; the classical figures she portrayed will long remain in the memory of her enthusiastic audiences. She acted beautifully the roles of Desdemona and Ophelia, of Schiller's Amalia, Ostrovski's Katherine and Kruchinina, and many others. But in the graceless stock types of Almas and Yagut there was nothing to interpret.

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1. For a photograph of Afganly in such a role, see Dzhafarov, op. cit., plate facing p. 172.
2. In Dzhabarly's play of that name.
3. For photographs of M. Davudova in various roles, see Dzhafarov, op. cit., plates facing pp. 116, 144, 173.

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The development of the art of acting was also considerably hampered by the low cultural level of the average Soviet audience, the "trade-union" audience composed of laborers, peasants, artisans--in other words, that part of the population which has no understanding of theater art and is interested in the events on the stage without caring particularly about their meaning. In playing to this audience, the actor was frequently compelled to follow Rottenvakh's erroneous theory: "Art is not for the people. To make it understandable to them, the level of art must be lowered to the cultural level of the people." Soviet critics approved this theory and enforced its application. Many actors followed it in their search for easy acclaim, and the end of their artistic careers was tragic. Some great actors succumbed to this influence completely, and their standards sank lower and lower, until finally there was nothing of the actor left about them. This down-hill process is exemplified by the careers of Suleiman Hadji Zadeh and Aziza Khanum. There were, however, some actors who valued their art above all else and refused to submit to this absurd theory. Among those who remained firm in their devotion to their art, and who paid for it with their lives, were such great actors as Abas Mirza Sharifov and Ul'vi Redjab.

Finally, the actors of Soviet Azerbaidzhan have failed to master the art of oral expression, an especially important element of the art of acting. An actor incapable of articulate and cultivated self-expression becomes an enigma to the audience, whereas an actor in full command of his language and alive to its modulations conveys not only the basic meaning of the ideas of the character he is playing but also the finest nuances of this meaning. The demands on the actor are somewhat less great in a dialogue, where the characters assist each other in communicating the playwright's ideas to the audience. In the monologue, however, the actor must summon and utilize all the means of expression at his disposal. Delivery of a monologue requires polished perfection, since it is the playwright's formulation of the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters. To make these ideas and emotions real, the actor must speak the lines clearly, intelligently and artistically.

But the actors of Soviet Azerbaidzhan--and this is particularly true of the young actors, the beginners who have graduated from theatrical schools--have an imperfect knowledge both of the language and of its artistic delivery. The basic cause of this fault lies in the weakness of the courses given by theatrical academies in the Azerbaidzhan language. Having been in charge of the educational section (uchebnaya chast') in one of these academies, the author can speak as a direct

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witness. Theater academies have a four-year program. The largest number of class hours is assigned to the study of political subjects and the Russian language, which is considered important because it is "the language of the October Revolution."[1] Only two hours a week are allotted to the study of the native language, and this is supposed to give the student a consummate mastery of it. Five hours a week are devoted to Russian, four hours to the history of the Communist Party, four hours to Marxism-Leninism, etc.

At one of the academy's organizational conferences, the students questioned the comparatively small number of hours given to the study of their native tongue. They were informed by Mirza Ibrahimov, head of the Committee on Art Affairs of Azerbaidzhan, that more time should be devoted to the other subjects because full familiarity with them is indispensable to an actor who must above all be ideologically firm and true to the Soviet spirit. In other words, to become a skilled actor in Soviet Azerbaidzhan one must know by heart the precepts of Lenin, excerpts from the works of Karl Marx, and the Stalin Constitution; the study of theater proper is a secondary issue. This education may produce a trained propagandist for the Communist Party, but it does not develop acting skill.

The author knew one student who had the boldness to tell the Committee that his work was excellent in his professional courses because he needed them to become an actor, and poor in the courses in ideological indoctrination because they would not help him to achieve his artistic goal. This student subsequently "disappeared," and it was later learned that he had been sent to a labor camp.

Despite these handicaps, some actors of the Azizbekov Theater are outstanding for their command of the language and the artistry of their delivery. From among the old group, there are Sidgi Rukhulla, M. Aliyev, Kyazim Ziya, and the actress Mariza-khanum Davudova. There are also some young students who devote themselves to their art with great earnestness and self-denial, giving all their free time to art and not taking the study of compulsory political subjects too seriously. But these are the exceptions; the majority of theatrical school graduates sacrifice art to the study of Party ideology.

1. Not, as one might have expected, because it is the language of Pushkin!

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III. The Political Status and Living Conditions of Actors in Soviet Azerbaidzhan

In the history of the theater of Transcaucasia, poverty and the actor are inseparable. Thus his present economic condition is no novelty. Generally speaking, his standard of living is low, particularly since Transcaucasia lies in the second zone of supply of the U.S.S.R. (the Soviet Union is divided into several zones of supply; Moscow and Leningrad are in the first zone, Baku and Tbilisi in the second.) Consequently, salaries in Transcaucasian theaters are much lower than in Moscow theaters, and many actors are obliged to look for additional work. This is true not only of low-salaried actors but of those with average salaries, especially if they have no children. Comfort is enjoyed chiefly by stars of the Soviet theater who have been repaid for their "reliability" with honorary titles; by those awarded the Order of Lenin; by actors successful in portraying Party leaders like Lenin or Stalin; and by actors who hold a Party office in addition to their work in the theater.

One typical actor known to the author lived in a single room with his wife and four children. In the corridor there was a so-called kitchen, shared by several families. The actor supplemented his income by teaching in one of the theatrical schools; his wife was unable to find work, having to take care of the children. In answer to the actor's pleas the administration of the theater finally arranged to let him rent a room in a hotel for use as a studio when he was studying his roles. This additional financial burden (beyond his means even with the fifty percent discount he was allowed,) made his situation even more hopeless than before. Each month he received 800 rubles from the theater and 200 rubles from the theatrical academy. After he had paid for rent, utilities, taxes and government loans, there was never enough left to feed his family. His financial situation finally became so desperate that he was forced to commit two of his children to a state institution.

Nor were theater students in Baku any better off. Students there, as in other Soviet cities, were allowed a monthly stipend during the entire four-year course, but this stipend was so small (60 to 90 rubles a month) that it did not begin to cover their living expenses.

Life was particularly hard for students who came from towns outside Baku and who lived in student dormitories. Some of them helped unload ships at the Baku wharves; others developed special sidelines, like one girl who traced blueprints at night.

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Those who were suited to it were able to get occasional parts in the Theater for the Young Spectator; other theaters would pay 5 rubles a night to students for playing in crowd scenes or providing backstage crowd sound effects. None of the students were in very good physical condition for their lectures, which started at nine in the morning, and none of them earned enough money to stretch to the end of the month, when they received their stipend. Those were their hungry days in a literal sense, and the students would pool their meager resources to buy food.

There were students who at last resorted to petty thievery, because they were not strong enough for physical labor and could not find sufficient miscellaneous employment. Some of these were talented boys with a burning desire to complete their artistic training, but unable to continue their studies without money for food. Petty thievery was not limited to theatrical schools but occurred also among students in colleges and universities. Sometimes it was possible for the teachers to obtain the release of a student who had been caught stealing money or goods, but when this failing was combined with an inadequate knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, as sometimes happened, the student's fate was sealed. One such student known to the author, an Armenian youth of exceptional promise but too weak to support himself by physical labor, was arrested by the NKVD and deported to the northern forced labor camps after failing to pass an examination in Party history.

The Fate of the Actor Sharifov

More terrible than the poverty the actor had to endure, however, was the loss of freedom of thought and speech; he had to live in an atmosphere tense with oppression. He became a tool of the Bolshevik Party, carrying out its demands unquestioningly and without demur. Perhaps a brief case history-the story of Abas Mirza Sharifov-will best convey the political atmosphere in which the actor lived and worked.

From the 1880's when he began his career until his death, the name of Sharifov is inseparably linked with the development of the Azerbaidzhan theater. When he started his work, the backward, ignorant people of Azerbaidzhan regarded actors and the theater as something strange and foreign. Travelling from town to town, acting in and directing a theatrical troupe, Sharifov made the people listen to him and understand him and awakened in them an interest in and love for the theater. It was he who was responsible for bringing

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to the Azerbaidzhan stage such Western European classic dramatists as Shakespeare, Schiller and Gutzkow. His name belongs on the roster of the great actors of the world; he was a natural actor, and seemed to have been born expressly to recreate the immortal characters of Shakespeare.

Sharifov was particularly superb as Hamlet. On the stage he was no longer Sharifov--before the audience stood the Prince of Denmark himself, with all his passions and his suffering. Sharifov's Hamlet was a real, fully-rounded human being--neither the irresolute young scholar nor the arrogant and ardent declaimer often presented by other actors.

Sharifov's Othello was another complete, brilliant characterization. He played Othello as a universally respected, extremely proud man, conscious of his importance to his country; very demanding, stern, almost cruel as a military leader, but infinitely gentle and tender as a husband.

In Dzhabarly's Bride of Fire Sharifov acted the part of Akshin. The role is a difficult one to perform because of Akshin's inner conflict between his love for El'khan as his brother and his hatred for him as an adversary. In Sharifov's characterization the audience could see and feel the strength of these conflicting emotions.

In his book about the Azizbekov Theater, Dzhafarov refers only briefly to Sharifov, characterizing him as "an enemy of the people."[1] If he had attempted to praise Sharifov as he deserved, his book would not have been passed for publication by the Soviet censor, since Sharifov had fallen into disfavor with the Bolsheviks.

Sharifov gave a course in acting technique at the Azerbaidzhan Theatrical Academy at the time when the author of the present article was head of the academy's educational section. He was the idol of all the students at the academy, not only the Azerbaidzhan students but the Armenians and Russians as well. He gave himself unsparingly to the students, imparting to them his wealth of knowledge and experience and training them as actors and artists.

At the close of one academic year, Sharifov's students brought him a bouquet. In accepting it he prophetically foretold that it would be the last which he would receive. Shortly thereafter the director of the Azerbaidzhan Theater

1. Op. cit., p. 118.

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in Baku[1] assigned to him the role of the class enemy, Suleiman, in Ibrahimov's play Hayat. Sharifov refused to accept the assignment, on the grounds that the role was not suited to him. Once before he had refused to play the part of a class enemy, in the play Yashar. The director of the theater, Iskénderov, immediately reported Sharifov's refusal to Ibrahimov, head of the Azerbaidzhan Committee on Art Affairs and the author of the play in question. Ibrahimov, in turn, informed the NKVD, which already had Sharifov on its lists of "unreliables." On the following day Sharifov was arrested and denounced in the newspapers as "an enemy of the people."

At the time when these events took place, the author of the present article was spending his second month in the Kishlinski prison in the eastern quarter of Baku. One evening when we were eating our wretched supper the Azerbaidzhan lyric poet Myushfik came up to me. He always managed to learn in some mysterious way about the most recent arrests. This time he reported a new arrest-"Hamlet." Everyone knew that he meant Sharifov.

At that time I was imprisoned in a large room of the section set aside for "political unreliables." Others present included Myushfik; the great lyric playwright Husein Djavid; professors of history Gubaiduli and Tikhomirov; the pedagogue Veli Kuluflu; the philologist Choban-Zade; the former head of "Azerneisher" (the Azerbaidzhan State Publishing House) Ahmed Trinich; the director of the pedagogical institute M. Mamedov; the head of the Armenian department of the pedagogical institute, the young philosopher Der-Manuelian; and the critic Alinazim.

With the arrival of Sharifov the life of the room underwent a change. Whenever our spirit sank especially low, Sharifov would recite at our request passages from the poems of Djavid, Firdausi's Shah Namah, or other works. These readings constituted the only happy memories of that time for those who were imprisoned.

In Soviet prisons it was generally the case that the NKVD began its work at midnight. If the prisoner was being called out for an interrogation, the guard called him by his last name and added "for questioning"; if the prisoner was being freed, the guard called for him to come "with his things"; but if he was being led out to execution, the guard simply called out his last name. In the first three months after Sharifov's arrest he was called out four times for questioning. On the third occasion he did not return until 5 a.m.

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1. The Azizbekov Theater.

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He was unrecognizable--his eyes were blackened and bruises covered his face and body. He tried to say something to us but was unable to do so. Finally he managed to utter a few words: "I have no hope of leaving here. I had to sign some kind of papers, after frightful beatings." He was unable to say any more, and wept silently, without tears.

Only after a few days did he sufficiently regain his self-control to say something more. As his last request to us, his fellow-prisoners, he asked that the writer Trinich and the playwright Djavid, who had quarrelled several years earlier but both of whom were now in prison, should make friends. The reconciliation took place, and in honor of it Sharifov recited, for the last time in his life, Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be." We listened as though transfixed, holding our breath in order not to disturb the speaker in any way. After he had finished he took a sad farewell of us. It was his last monologue. That night he was again called out for questioning. As he left his eyes took final leave of us. I felt it was the spirit of art itself which was departing.

He did not return after the interrogation, but was put in solitary confinement. We learned later that he had been subjected to terrible tortures. Two months later Myushfik found out that on that very night Sharifov had committed suicide by biting through the veins of his arm. Thus ended the life of the great actor A.M. Sharifov.

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A Note on Transliteration

The Azerbaidzhan language, a member of the Turkic family, is written in the Soviet Union in a modified form of the Cyrillic alphabet. In books published for Russian-speaking readers, however, the Soviets use the unmodified Cyrillic script to render Azerbaidzhanian names and terms, despite the fact that the Azerbaidzhan language contains a number of sounds not adequately represented in the Cyrillic alphabet (e.g., the aspirate, English "h"). For this reason it is often more accurate to transliterate Azerbaidzhan names and titles direct from Azerbaidzhan into English rather than from the unmodified Cyrillic form. The play title Hadji Gara, for example, is transliterated into unmodified Cyrillic as Gadzhi Gara, a form which makes the same impression of strangeness on an Azerbaidzhanian that Gamlet does on an Englishman.

In the present study an effort has been made to present names and titles in transliteration as close as possible to the Azerbaidzhanian original rather than as rendered in unmodified Cyrillic. At the author's request a somewhat simplified system of transliteration has been used in the case of some proper names (e.g., Djavid), but no effort has been made to achieve complete consistency in this respect.

A Note on Play Titles

As noted above (footnote 2, pp. 1-2), variant Russian translations of the titles of Azerbaidzhanian dramatic works are common, and it is sometimes difficult to know whether two similar titles refer to a single play or two different plays. To resolve such questions and provide a sound basis for further study it would be desirable to start with the original Azerbaidzhan title in every case. It has not proved possible, however, to obtain the original title of all the plays mentioned in the present study. The following list, therefore, is incomplete.

Azerbaidzhanian title	Russian title(s)	Title used herein
Lankarun Hanun Vazire	Vizir' Lenkoranskovo khanstva	The Vizier of Lenkoran
Aye ooddoo katchagah	Medved'--pobeditel' razboinika	The Bear, Victor over the Bandit
Zamanun Kahramanlare	Geroi vremeni	A Hero of the Time

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Azerbaidzhanian title	Russian title(s)	Title used herein
Yagishdan Yagmoore	Iz dozhdya v liven', or Iz ognya, da v polymya	Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire
Od gelini	Nevesta ognya	Bride of Fire
1905 el	V 1905 godu	1905
Oktai, el ogly	Oktai, syn naroda	Oktai, Son of the People
Katchagh Nabi	Razboinik Nabi	Nabi, the Brigand

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